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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABUJA 000321

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/16/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: FEUD BETWEEN OBASANJO AND ATIKU NEARS KNOCKOUT  
ROUND

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Classified By: Political Counselor Russell Hanks for reasons 1.4 (b and  
d)

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Summary  
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¶1. (U) The protracted war between President Olusegun Obasanjo and Vice President Atiku Abubakar has entered a critical phase as the finish line for the 2007 elections approaches. Both sides have turned up the rhetoric since Atiku's return to Nigeria in January. During the second week in February, Vice-President Atiku accused President Obasanjo of approving "over \$2 billion to buy weapons to suppress the people of Niger Delta." President Obasanjo described Atiku's outbursts as "treasonable." A presidential aide later told the media that the presidency has uncovered a "plot" by Atiku to destabilize Nigeria. On February 12, the Nigerian government said that Atiku and other candidates, listed by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, were not eligible for office. The disqualification is interpreted as yet another salvo in this protracted and intensely personal battle apparently nearing the knockout round. End Summary

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BACKGROUND TO THE CRISIS  
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¶2. (U) The conflict between Obasanjo and Atiku emerged publicly in 2003 when the President announced his plan to contest the elections without including the Vice President as running mate. The dexterous political moves of Atiku grudgingly forced Obasanjo to adopt him as deputy. After the duo emerged victorious the rivalry between the two men intensified, becoming a full-blown conflict. In April 2006 Vice President Atiku criticized the plan to extend President Obasanjo's tenure, thus clearly marking the battle lines. Atiku won a solid victory by teaming up with other opposition groups and defeating the controversial constitutional amendments. Since that episode the relationship has deteriorated to a point seemingly beyond reconciliation, and has become a central calculation in the Nigerian political equation.

¶3. (U) The dispute has polarized Nigerian politics and has

been a central focus of attention of both the President and Vice-President. The President appears intent in blocking Atiku's ambition to be Nigeria's next president. President Obasanjo has suspended him from the party, unilaterally declared his seat vacant (although the President relented and eventually agreed to let the courts decide), stripped Atiku of the privileges of office including staff and transportation, and on February 12 declared that the Federal Government considered him ineligible for office. Atiku no longer attends the weekly meetings of the Federal Executive Council (FEC).

14. (U) The Vice President, clearly on the defensive, has fought back, primarily by making accusations about the intentions and conduct of the President. When Atiku appeared before the Senate Committee investigating the looting of Petroleum Technology Development Fund (PTDF), Atiku rolled out a litany of accusations against the president alleging the fund was used to finance efforts to extend the president's tenure, and to confer financial favors on political associates.

15. (U) On February 20, the Abuja High Court is expected to hear Atiku's case regarding his eligibility to run for office. The date also coincides with the last day for parties to declare their candidates for president. Anything less than a definitive decision will effectively leave the issue in legal limbo. Additionally, even if there is a definitive decision by the court, either side can appeal the court ruling, meaning any ruling can be reversed.

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CORRUPTION CHARGES VERSUS DICTATORSHIP  
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16. (U) The two major actors have been advancing different

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reasons to explain their fractious relationship: while Obasanjo argued his action is predicated on his resolve to fight corruption, Atiku says he is fighting the President's plan to remain in power. In a recent interview with visiting American journalists, Obasanjo accused his deputy of being irredeemably corrupt and insisted that his administration and the ruling PDP were all out to rid Nigeria of corruption. "The number two in the country (Atiku) is fighting me," Obasanjo told the journalist in an exchange that was given extensive coverage on national television. "It is a fight of a lifetime because of corruption around and about him," Obasanjo said. On February 10 at a PDP presidential rally in Akure, President Obasanjo described Atiku's political party, Action Congress (AC) as "Alliance for Corruption," maintaining the party members comprised of "robbers and thieves."

17. (U) Atiku has couched his response in terms of "defying tyranny and for upholding the spirit of genuine democracy." He repeated similar statements at different fora. At a rally in Kano, Atiku said that the Obasanjo's administration was responsible for the lack of water, electricity and security Nigerians now collectively face and that "We must unite to ensure that this old man (Obasanjo) leaves office on the 29th May whether he wants to go or not. The game plan of this man (Obasanjo) is that he does not want to conduct elections and handover power in May, he simply wants to be in power to perpetuate dictatorship. We must team up to force him go."

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WHO WINS, WHO LOSES?  
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18. (C) In Nigeria's fractious political environment the contest between the two men has resulted in increased sympathy for Atiku among the political opposition and, at least temporarily, united the opposition to Obasanjo and the

PDP. The split between the President and Vice President has also placed Atiku in an important position in determining how the opposition will ultimately play its hand. Atiku, a source told us, consults General Ibrahim Babangida and Buhari on a regular basis before taking any political action. The AC must decide by next week whether it will conclude its pact with the ANPP to field a consensus candidate for president and vice president. Atiku has thus far, garnered most of his support from disgruntled PDP members but his increasing popularity has the potential to draw from both Buhari and PDP supporters. If he decides to sacrifice his presidential ambition by backing Buhari, such an alliance will present a formidable ticket.

¶9. (C) At a significant political cost, Obasanjo has succeeded in frustrating Atiku's quest to replace him. Tied up in the courts and with his financial backers under pressure, Atiku remains on the defensive and may eventually bow out of the contest. President Obasanjo has already succeeded in denying Atiku the opportunity to contest under the ruling PDP. The PDP candidate, Umaru Yar'adua is almost completely dependent on the party and the President to finance and organize his campaign, leaving him vulnerable to being labeled a pawn in a greater game.

¶10. (C) Perhaps the biggest potential losers are the Nigerian institutions which underpin the country's transition to democracy. The Independent National Election Commission and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, both of which are perceived as bowing to partisan pressures leading to partisan decisions. According to a poll released on February 14 by the Alliance for Credible Elections (ACE) and the Center for Law Enforcement (CLEEN), nearly a third of 12,000 respondent felt that INEC was a partisan institution, and columnists from almost all major Nigerian newspapers have criticized the EFCC for its apparently selective and partisan enforcement. This perception has been reinforced by its latest report on disqualified candidates which omitted several obvious presidential allies.

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COMMENT  
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¶11. (C) The state of Nigerian politics is very much in flux as the deadline for final candidate substitutions approaches.

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Many of the major decisions at the presidential level will go down to the wire and be influenced by the Obasanajo-Atiku showdown. Disqualification of or withdrawal by Atiku, likely but far from certain, may be an initial victory for President Obasanjo and the PDP but also sets the stage for a more united opposition, and thus an even more dramatic showdown at the polls.

CAMPBELL